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Afghan firm erects building on Corps of Engineers' compound in Kabul

KABUL – An Afghan construction firm completed a work on a new residence building on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' headquarters compound in northern Afghanistan, exemplifying the Corps of Engineers' capacity development initiative to hire and nurture emerging Afghan companies.

"It's a great project. I'm really proud to have it in our portfolio," said Col. Thomas H. Magness, the commander of Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

Essayons House is a two story structure made of stacked shipping containers, like most residence buildings on the Qalaa House compound in downtown Kabul. The new building features 26 living quarters with heating and cooling units in each unit, six restrooms with showers, and two laundry rooms.

The structure was completed on budget and on schedule, a credit to Jamal Aziz Construction & Engineering Co., of Kabul, Magness said during a grand opening ceremony on Sunday, Nov. 28. The company completed the \$497,000 project in seven months, using approximately 80 Afghan employees.

Jamal Aziz president Mahboob Jamal said the firm gained valuable experience with the project, and it's poised to take on bigger projects. "This was like \$500,000. We are ready to build like up to \$5 million," he said.

Jamal Aziz's current work and its future ambitions illustrate the value of the capacity development initiative, Magness said.

"This really is what capacity development is all about. You see a small contractor like this hiring a lot of men," he said. "This is really where employment happens; it's at the small construction company level. And you see them as they grow. They flex their muscles and they develop their capacity on something like this."

The building will house 39 residents, comprised of military personnel, civilian employees and contractors assigned to the Corps of Engineers in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. About half of the residents are assigned to double-occupancy rooms and half to single-occupancy rooms.

Essayons House has several safety features, including a fire alarm system with pulls at each exit, and fire extinguishers at each end of the hallways.

The building's residents drew room keys from ammunition boxes during the grand opening and were invited to move in immediately. Some residents moved from Patriot House, another residence building that is being converted into office space, while other residents moved from Peace House and Victory House to more evenly distribute the compound's population in the various residence buildings.

Magness unveiled the name "Essayons House" for the new building during the dedication. The name was chosen after a vote by the district's employees across northern Afghanistan. The name is drawn from the Corps of Engineers' slogan, "Essayons," which is French for "We shall try."

Capt. Jesus Perez, the officer in charge of the Corps of Engineers' Kabul Central Area Office, said he was impressed with Jamal Aziz's work. "They were on schedule. They had good quality. They were very responsive and they had good management," said Perez, who oversaw the construction.

As it turned out, Perez now has a personal stake in the building. He was one of the lucky district employees whose name was drawn to live in Essayons House.

Magness credited Perez, and fellow Corps of Engineers personnel Lawrence Jakubielski, Steve Parella and Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Gordon Brewer for their contributions as construction representatives, and local national Ahmad Bahaduri for his service as a quality assurance representative.

The new building is just south of the namesake Qalaa House headquarters building, in proximity to two other residence buildings, Liberty House and Freedom House.

The Corps of Engineers is the primary organization building army bases, police stations, roads, airstrips and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan to increase the country's stability and economy.

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